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ABSTRACT

Reasons dropouts offer for withdrawal from college and differences between respondents and nonrespondents to a followup questionnaire were studied. During the spring 1980 semester, freshmen and sophomores completed a questionnaire describing their background and college experiences. A total of 156 dropouts (those who did not complete courses during the fall 1981 semester) were mailed a followup questionnaire. The response rate was 47 percent (74 questionnaires were returned). Respondents did not differ from nonrespondents on 1979-1980 grade point average (GPA) or on key background and experience variables. Relationships of GPA and spring 1980 survey variables to reasons given for dropping out provided evidence for the validity of academic problems, responsibilities for children, other family responsibilities, and career indecision as reasons for dropping out. There was little evidence for the validity of lack of money as a reason; students who were not achieving important goals tended to cite lack of money. (Author/SW)

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A Follow-up Survey of College Dropouts: Who Responded and How Valid Were Their Answers?

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This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, April, 1984.

Abstract

During the spring, 1980 semester, freshmen and sophomores completed a questionnaire describing their backgrounds and college experiences. Dropouts (those who did not complete courses during the fall, 1981 semester) were mailed a follow-up questionnaire. The response rate was 47%. Respondents did not differ from nonrespondents on 1979-80 GPA or on key background and experience variables; in other words, there was no evidence of systematic bias in the follow-up sample. Relationships of GPA and spring 1980 survey variables to reasons given for dropping out provided evidence for the validity of academic problems, responsibilities for children, other family responsibilities, and career indecision as reasons for dropping out. There was little evidence for the validity of lack of money as a reason; students who were not achieving important goals tended to cite lack of money.

Extensive research has been done on college students' self-reported reasons for dropping out of college. Although other types of studies are needed to explain retention, studies of reasons for dropping out of college can be useful to colleges which are trying to increase retention.

There are several problems with this area of research. First, who responds to questionnaires which are mailed to college dropouts? Are certain types of students more likely to respond, thereby biasing the results? These questions are important because of the relatively low response rates obtained in many studies of dropouts.

Secondly, how valid are students' self-reported reasons for dropping out? Lenning, Beal, and Sauer (1980) point out that students may not understand their reasons for leaving, or may tend to give socially acceptable reasons in order to protect their self images. Demos (1968) did a study in which students' self-reported reasons for dropping out were compared with the reasons given by trained counselors who had interviewed the students. The counselors could assess their reasons for dropping out in more depth than could be done with a written form, and perhaps were aware of reasons the student did not report on the form. Demos compared the percentage of students who gave certain reasons for dropping out with the percentages for whom the counselor gave those reasons. Students, more than counselors, identified need for a job and

financial problems as the reason for dropping out. Counselors, more than students, thought that lack of motivation, difficulty of the work, and uncertainty as to major were the reasons for dropping out.

Demitroff (1974) conducted a similar study which involved exit interviews with students who had cancelled their registration at the University of Iowa. The counselor identified emotional and social problems and vocational indecision as the most frequent reasons for dropping out of the university; he thought these reasons were important for higher percentages of students than did the students themselves. On the other hand, the students emphasized financial reasons more than the counselor. Both students and the counselor thought that disinterest in school was important.

Both of these studies compared the percentages of students giving certain reasons with the percentages of students for whom the counselor thought those reasons were important. Neither study related student-identified reasons to counselor-identified reasons or to any other student variables.

The present study used data from a survey conducted in the spring, 1980 semester and mail follow-up questionnaire data collected over a year later. It was designed to determine whether there were significant differences between dropouts who did and did not respond to the follow-up questionnaire, and whether spring, 1980 data on

the students provided evidence for the validity of their reasons for dropping out.

Determinants of Response vs. Nonresponse

A number of hypotheses were developed about the types of students who might or might not respond, for both practical and social-psychological reasons. It was hypothesized that:

1. Students who were living with their parents in spring, 1980 would be less likely to receive the follow-up questionnaire. If the former student had since moved out, the questionnaire might not have been forwarded, especially if the parents thought that the student was no longer interested in the university.

2. Former students who had had children in spring, 1980 would be less likely to respond, due to time pressures.

3. Minority students would be less likely to respond, due to reluctance to participate in research which they might perceive as unrelated to action on minority problems, and to feelings of resentment at being used as "guinea pigs."

4. Spring, 1980 full-time students would be more committed to the university than part-time students and therefore would have higher response rates.

5. For students who received poor grades, the university was a failure experience. Therefore, 1979-80 GPA might be positively correlated with response.

6. Overall satisfaction with the university in spring, 1980 would affect response rates. There are two possibilities: (a) students who were dissatisfied might be less likely to respond, as a way of getting back at the university, and (b) students who were dissatified might be more likely to respond, in order to voice their dissatisfaction.

Correlates of Reasons for Leaving the University

The following hypotheses were developee concerning the spring, 1980 correlates of the reasons for leaving the university which were given on the follow-up questionnaire.

1. GPA in 1979-80 would be negatively correlated with academic problems as a reason for dropping out. (If there was a tendency to give ego-defensive reasons, GPA would be correlated with boredom with courses and/or change in career plans.)

2. Marital status (married) and number of children would be correlated with responsibilities for children and other family responsibilities as reasons for dropping out.

3. The achievement of goals to discover career interests and form career plans would be negatively correlated with change in career plans and indecision about major or career plans.

4. Marital status (being married) and number of children would be correlated with lack of money as a reason for dropping out.

5. For students age 21 and under, parents' occupational

status would be negatively correlated with the importance of lack of money. (Such students would probably be financially dependent on their parents, and parents with less prestigious occupations would be less able to support their children's education financially.)

6. Overall satisfaction with the university would be negatively correlated with dislike of the university as a reason for dropping out.

Method

Subjects

In the spring, 1980 semester, a questionnaire was given out to students in randomly selected classes at a major urban university. Classes in Afro-American Studies and the Department of Educational Opportunity were slightly oversampled, in order to get more minority and disadvantaged students. The questionnaires were administered during class periods, and virtually all students filled them out. They were asked to give their social security numbers for research purposes.

For a follow-up study of the spring, 1980 survey freshmen and sophomores, university records were used to identify the 156 students who did not complete courses for the fall, 1981 semester. A four-page questionnaire was mailed to them. For minority students, it came from the Center for the Study of Minorities and the Disdavantaged. For white students, it came from the Office of Research of the School

of Education. Reminder phone calls were made to as many minority students who could be reached, because of the researcher's special concern for minority issues. About 10 white students were also phoned. Of the 156 questionnaires mailed, 19 were undeliverable and 74 were returned, for a response rate of 47% (54%, for those for whom good addresses were available).

Data

Original spring, 1980 questionnaire. The Spring 1980 Survey questionnaire contained demographic questions and questions about aspirations, awareness of and use of student services and satisfaction with them, participation in university social life, and overall satisfaction with the university. The students were presented with 17 academic, career, personal and social goals and were asked (1) if the goal was important to them, and (2) whether it had been achieved, or was being achieved. For each goal a goal achievement score was computed which indicated the extent to which important goals were being achieved (1 = goal important, not achieved; 2 = not important; 3 = important, achieved or being achieved).

Grades. University records provided the students' grade point averages for the 1979-80 academic year.

Follow-up questionnaire. The former students were presented with a list of 10 possible reasons for dropping out of college: "lack of money," "change in career plans," "undecided as to major

or career plans," "bored with courses," "didn't like UWM," "responsibilities for children," "other family responsibilities," "health problems," "dissatisfied with requirements or regulations at UWM," "academic problems," and "other reasons." The former students were asked to indicate whether each reason was (1) not important, (2) somewhat important, or (3) very important in the decision to drop out of the university.

Results

Correlates of Response vs. Nonresponse

To determine whether the 63 nonrespondents differed from the 72 respondents to the follow-up questionnaire, nonresponse vs. response was related to the variables identified in Hypotheses 1 to 6 (residence with parents, number of children, part- vs. full-time student status, overall satisfaction with the university, and 1979-80 GPA) and with major demographic variables (age, sex, parents' education, parents' occupational status (coded 1, blue collar; 2, clerical, sales; and 3, professional, technical, managerial), marital status (single vs. married) and hours worked per week). Tau b's and c's were computed for nominal, ordinal, and/or highly skewed variables (sex, race/ethnicity, residence with parents, parents' occupational status, marital status, number of children, and part- vs. full-time student status). They ranged from -.08 to .14; none were significant. Biserial r's were computed for the remaining variables. They ranged

from -.06 to .01; none were significant. The same statistics were computed separately for men and women. For women, hours worked per week (on a four-point scale) was significantly negatively related to responding to the questionnaire (biserial r = -.22 (71), $p < .05$. This one low correlation could have been obtained by chance.

Reasons for Leaving the University

For each of the possible reasons for leaving the university, the percentage rating it very important was tabulated. The major reason for leaving was "change in career plans," mentioned by about a third. "Undecided as to major or career plans" and "lack of money" were chosen by about a fifth each. "Didn't like UWM," "academic problems," "bored with courses," and "family responsibilities other than children" were rated very important by about 10% each. A geographical move was mentioned by 11% under "other reasons." "Dissatisfied with requirements or regulations" was rated very important by only 4%, and "responsibilities for children" was rated very important by only 3%.

Correlates of Reasons for Leaving

Age, parents' occupational status, employment status, marital status, number of children, goal achievement scores, GPA, and overall satisfaction with the university were correlated with the importance ratings of the 10 reasons for dropping out. Tau b's and c's were used for parents' occupational status, marital status, and number

of children. Pearson product-moment correlations were used for the remaining variables.

Academic Problems

GPA was correlated -.55 (60), $p < .01$, with the importance of academic problems as a reason for dropping out. There was no tendency for poor grades to be correlated with face-saving reasons for dropping out, such as "bored with courses" or "change in career plans."

Career Change or Uncertainty

Achievement of the goals, Discover Career Interests and Form Career Plans, expressed in the Spring 1980 Survey, was not significantly correlated with the importance of "undecided as to major or career plans" or "change in career plans" as reasons for dropping out on the follow-up questionnaire.

However, other research (Hall, 1983) showed that freshmen, more than any other class, indicated that the goals to discover career interests and form career plans were important and had not been achieved. Career indecision might be normal for freshmen; it might be related to dropping out only for more advanced students. To test this hypothesis, the relevant correlations were computed only for sophomores. Achievement of the Career Plans goal was correlated -.32 (31), $p < .05$, with the importance of indecision concerning major or career plans as a reason for dropping out.

Lack of Money

Marital status (single vs. married) and number of children were unrelated to "lack of money" as a reason for leaving the university. For the students who were age 21 or younger, father's occupational status tended to be correlated with the importance of "lack of money" as a reason for dropping out (tau c = -.18 (52), $p < .10$). However, "lack of money" was correlated with four of the 17 goal achievement scores: Increase Knowledge in an Academic Field, $r = -.29$, $p < .01$; Other Academic Goals (other than Increase Knowledge, Obtain a Degree, and Complete Courses for Transfer), $r = -.33$, $p < .01$; Discover Career Interests, $r = -.33$, $p < .01$; and Meet People, -.23, $p < .05$. For all correlations, d.f. = 69.

Responsibilities for Children and Family

Marital status and number of children were slightly but significantly related to the importance of "responsibilities for children" and "other family responsibilities" as reasons for leaving the university. The tau c's ranged from .07 to .11; all were significant at the .01 level.

Dislike of the University

The students' overall rating of satisfaction with the university in the Spring 1980 Survey was not significantly correlated with the importance of dislike of the university as a reason for dropping out on the follow-up questionnaire.

Other Relationships

Most of the other correlations were close to zero, as would be expected. However, there were a few other significant correlations which seem plausible. Low grades were correlated -.29 (50), $p < .05$, with the importance of "health problems" as a reason for dropping out. Age was correlated -.34 (70), $p < .01$, with "change in career plans." This finding implies that older students were more fixed in their career directions. Age was also correlated with "health problems" (r = .40 (69), $p < .001$) and with "lack of money" (r = .35 (69), $p < .01$). Father's occupational status was correlated with "responsibilities for children" (tau b = -.24 (60), $p < .05$) and with "other family responsibilities" (tau b = -.25 (62), $p < .05$). Also, "dissatisfied with requirements of regulations at UWM" was significantly negatively correlated with four Goal Achievement scores: Increase Knowledge, r = -.22, $p < .05$; Other Academic Goals, r = -.29, $p < .01$; and Meet People, r = -.31, $p < .01$. (For all correlations, d.f. = 67.)

Discussion

In this follow-up survey of college dropouts, which had a 47% response rate, there was support for none of the hypotheses concerning who would be more likely to return a mail questionnaire. Race/ethnicity, sex, age, full- vs. part-time student status, parents' education and occupational status, residence with parents, marital status, parenthood, and satisfaction with the university in spring, 1980 and 1979-80 GPA were all unrelated to whether the student returned the follow-up questionnaire. These findings provide evidence for the representativeness of similar samples of college dropouts. The results do not mean, of course, that high response rates are not an important goal in research on droupouts. Characteristics other than those studied may well be related to response vs. nonresponse.

The validity of various reasons given for leaving the university was assessed by relating the reasons given in the follow-up questionnaire to the original Spring, 1980 Survey data. There was good evidence for the validity of academic problems as a reason, and no evidence that students with low GPAs gave ego-defensive reasons for leaving.

There was also evidence for the validity of "responsibilities for children" and "other family responsibilities" as reasons for leaving. The importance of those reasons was related not only to

marital status and number of children in the Spring 1980 Survey, but also to low paternal occupational status. This finding implies that students from low income families were more likely to be burdened by responsibilities toward their families.

There was modest evidence for the validity of ratings of the importance of career indecision and change in career plans as reasons for leaving, for the small number of sophomores in the sample. (For freshmen, lack of a career plan may be relatively normative.)

However, the evidence for the validity of the ratings of the importance of "lack of money" was poor. Lack of money was only slightly related to availability of financial support, as indicated by father's occupational status. (Of course, parental willingness to finance a college education is not solely a matter of parental income.) The importance of "lack of money" was unrelated to family responsibilities, as indicated by marital status and number of children in the Spring, 1980 Survey. Obviously, other factors are involved in the ratings of "lack of money." It seems plausible that, as Demos (1968) and Demitroff (1974) suggested, students may blame lack of money for leaving college when the true reasons lie elsewhere. Students who indicated that they were not achieving important goals in the Spring 1980 Survey were more likely to cite "lack of money" as a reason for leaving. They probably meant that their education was not worth its cost to them.

"Dissatisfied with requirements or regulations at UWM" also tended to be cited by students who were not meeting important goals. Apparently "dissatisfied wtih requirements or regulations" was used as an excuse for leaving, when other reasons were actually involved.

The correlations between the Spring, 1980 Survey data on the students and their reasons for leaving the university would not be expected to be high, for several reasons. First, the students' situation might change between spring, 1980 and the time of dropping out of college. (Students may have married and had children, students who were undecided about their careers may have chosen careers, etc.) Second, the Spring, 1980 Survey data may not relate to reasons for dropping out. (For example, for a mother with adequate child care, responsibilities for children would not be a reason for dropping out. For the student who was dissatisfied with the university but who saw a college education as contributing to long-term goals, dislike of the university per se would not be a reason for leaving.) Third, some of the spring, 1980 measures were relatively unreliable. Achievement of the Career Plans was assessed with two items; overall satisfaction with the university, with one item.

Within the limitations of the study, the correlation results provide evidence for the validity of citations of academic problems, child and family responsibilities, and career indecision and change

in career plans as reasons for leaving college. These responses, of course, reflect the students' conscious perceptions of their reasons for leaving. Personality and motivational factors in dropping out were not assessed, and probably could not be assessed with a mail questionnaire. However, for the administrator who is concerned about retention, information about conscious perceptions will be useful.

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